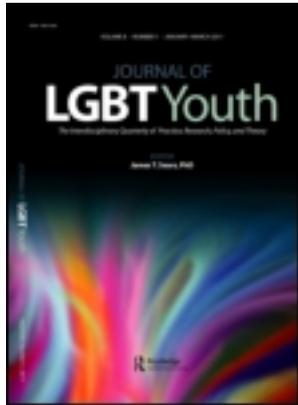


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Conditions of Living: Queer Youth Suicide, Homonormative Tolerance, and Relative Misery

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Despite the increasing social tolerance accorded nonheterosexual persons in many Western countries, queer youth suicide rates remain high. This opens the need to question not only how broad social conditions continue to make lives unlivable for many queer youth but whether queer community formations and representations that emerge within a tolerance framework provide supportive environments for fostering youth resilience. This article presents a theoretical approach to understanding the continuity of youth suicide by considering how queer community formations built on tolerance create new exclusions for some queer youth that can make a life unlivable in relation to peers. The article articulates the tolerance framework through a return to Dennis Altman's 40-year-old Homosexual Oppression and Liberation and the more recent "homonormativity" critique of queer politics. It examines how tolerance and homonormativity are implicated in exclusions and suicidality through the "relative misery" suicide thesis and the concept of frustrated aspiration.

KEYWORDS *Community, gay liberation, homonormativity, GLBT youth, suicide, tolerance*

Despite the increasing tolerance of nonheterosexual sexualities, identities, communities, representations, and cultural formations, the suicide rate among queer youth remains high (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009, p. 1001; Cover, 2005; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009, p. 346; Zhao, Montaro, Kgarua, & Thombs, 2010, p. 104). To understand the

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continuing high rates of queer youth suicide in the 2000s requires forming alternative approaches to queer youth suicide and sociality. One such approach is to investigate the failure of tolerance as the dominant normative framework for queer political organizing and for social and political receptiveness to queer political claims. Where tolerance, its dissemination of a normalizational ontology, and its dependence on the articulation of narrow stereotypes of queer persons (usually through a neoliberal depiction of queer consumerism, affluence, whiteness, and maleness that is reiterated as a disciplinary norm within queer politics and community) is problematic for queer youth is in the fact that those who understand themselves as nonheterosexual are not necessarily always accorded the privilege of queer community belonging and inclusion.

A useful means by which to understand how dominant political and activist frameworks are implicated in the continuing high rate of suicide involves examining how those frameworks operate to form cultural communities, which actively, if unwittingly, exclude younger queer persons. In this context, the tolerance framework is key to maintaining the conditions by which some young queer persons are unable to gain a sense of belonging or inclusion. The gay civil rights lobby politics that works within the tolerance framework, differing significantly from early 1970s' radical gay liberation (Sinfield, 1996, p. 271), has been the dominant cultural mode of lesbian/gay politics since the early 1980s, reliant on essentialist normative codes of both sexuality and gender and the putting forward a "safe" and recognizable representation of queer personage that does not challenge heteronormativity. It is a politics not of change or resignification of power-relations themselves but a politics, as Steven Epstein (1990, p. 290) has put it, of gaining a "piece of the pie." That is, existing categories, normativities, and institutional practices remain "natural" and unquestioned by "safe" queer political rights claims. While this framework has resulted in some improvements in the social situations and environments for younger nonheterosexual persons that had previously been thought to contribute to suicidality, particularly in the areas of media representation (Padva, 2004) and legal protections against discrimination (Almeida et al., 2009, p. 1002), protections against homophobic violence, and bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2008, p. 157), the prevalence of suicide among nonheterosexual youth remains high.¹

Although there have been many cultural theory critiques of the ways in which tolerance provides a mechanism for political and activist claims that do not question liberal and neoliberal social forms, a "warning" of the dangers of tolerance as a political goal and a method of queer community activism was made in the early 1970s from a gay liberationist perspective by Dennis Altman (1971) in his book *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation*. There is some value in exploring the relationship between tolerance and queer youth suicide through returning to Altman's early work, which, after 40 years and multiple editions, provides an important barometer against

which to measure the continuities and shifts in queer community politics. This article explores how Altman's framing of "tolerance" versus "acceptance," as political methodologies and as social formations within which the history of minority politics are made intelligible, can provide new ways to think about the problem of queer youth suicide and the factors by which suicide continues to remain a thinkable option for queer youth to overcome the unbearability of living.

I begin by examining how Altman juxtaposed tolerance and acceptance as political methodologies and as minority activist goals and the ways in which these govern different perception of historical political gain, progress, and time. I then turn to the ways in which the tolerance framework has fostered queer community formations as exclusive through the production of narrow stereotypes and depictions of "tolerable" queer persons through what has more recently been referred to as "homonormativity." It is argued that such exclusions for the sake of presenting a "tolerable" queer community results in the fact that community is far from being a "saving refuge" through which younger queer persons find salvation or belonging.

Finally, I show how queer youth suicide can be understood in the context of the gap between self-perception of oneself as queer and the self-perception of one's capacity or incapacity to be included in community by invoking the "relative misery" thesis, whereby one possible cause of queer youth suicide today can be the exacerbation of unbearability through the sense of never quite being able to belong. That is, where aspirations for queer community belonging seem to be frustrated, it is only by turning to an alternative radical politics of acceptance (in Altman's terms) or hospitality (in Levinas's, Derrida's, and Butler's similar terms) as the means by which to address queer youth suicide as a social issue. Returning to an exemplary text from early gay liberationist theorization of the nexus between minority politics, identity, and community encourages scholarship on queer youth suicide to denaturalize contemporary queer cultural forms and to consider the ways in which broader minority community political methodologies and representations are implicated in queer youth suicide as a continuing social problem.

ALTMAN'S LIBERATION AND TOLERANCE

Tolerance can be defined as the capacity to endure that which is difficult or painful to endure—in the case of persons, indulging the actions or opinions of others. In its most colloquial form, tolerance and toleration mean "to put up with." Tolerance, in 1970s' gay liberation, was figured as a form of oppression. For Altman (1971, p. 53), it was one of three types of oppression encountered by nonheterosexual persons, alongside persecution (through illegality of homosexual behavior) and discrimination (as prejudicial treatment of a person for membership of a group or category).

In Altman's Marcusean framework, tolerance is an emotional disposition or attitude that is internalized from an ideological social perspective; he points out that "most intelligent heterosexuals reject, intellectually, their hostility to homosexuals while unable to conquer their emotional repugnance. The outward result is tolerance" (Altman, 1971, p. 63). Tolerance, as a disposition, falls within Marcuse's predictions of forms of "repressive desublimation" where by apparent freedom to act in a particular way is channeled into restricted, falsely-liberated and narrow allowances (p. 105). Within this perspective, tolerance is not only *oppressive*, in the sense that it does not fully accept nonheterosexual persons to be considered worthy and worthwhile human beings, but also *repressive*.

On one hand, it has an impact on queer men by, as Altman (1971) notes, producing stereotyped homosexual bodies that are the image of toleration, producing a repressive discontentment among men with the "inevitable flaws of our own, and our lovers' bodies, and the more unable to perceive any beauty in those unlike the current stereotype" (p. 106). At the same time, for Altman, it allows the flourishing of contemporary neoliberal capitalism through the commodification of sex and sexuality—toleration of the homosexual through commodification, thereby obscuring, as he notes, the critique of how toleration persists within and through labor and consumption (p. 106).

Contemporary queer politics embraces tolerance as both a political goal and as a framework for gaining political rights, thereby actively asking or demanding for nothing more than the persecutory legal or discriminatory behaviors to be removed but leaving intact the social formations that allow dispositions of "putting up with" homosexual and other nonheterosexual persons. These, arguably, manifest in nonlegislative and policy sites such as social behavior, school grounds, curriculum, history, writing, journalism, and entertainment, whereby inclusion is conditional and marginal, leaving heterosexuality intact as a normative framework for sexuality, relationships, and determinants of kinship categories. The neoliberal privatization of risk and society permits nonpublic discriminatory or persecutory behaviors to persist, thereby maintaining the conditions that make queer youth suicide an outcome for many younger queer persons. The attention of contemporary queer politics to rights discourses rather than to addressing the situation of nonheterosexuality in its relational constitution in sociality—that is, the framework of tolerance—ignores the conditions that make suicide thinkable for queer youth.

This framework of tolerance, through which contemporary queer politics is articulated and by which its limitations are governed, contrasts markedly from the political goals and methods espoused by gay liberation during the 1970s. Altman structured his definitional understanding of tolerance as that which is distinct from acceptance, and from the liberatory struggle to seek acceptance through social change. Where tolerance, for

Altman (1971), was considered a “gift extended by the superior to the inferior,” which may be expressed through pity (or self-pride in one’s own declaration of tolerance), acceptance infers the “equal validity” of alternative styles of life (p. 59). For Altman, acceptance requires more than simply being included and/or protected within a political, legislative, or policy structure. Rather, it is a demand for liberation from the normative ontological framework that constitutes subjectivity and, particularly, sexual subjectivity in dichotomous, gender-trajected hetero/homo categorizations. Altman (1971) instead calls for a new subjectivity:

Homosexuals can win acceptance as distinct from tolerance only by a transformation of society, one that is based on a “new human” who is able to accept the multifaceted and varied nature of his or her sexual identity. That such a society can be founded is the gamble upon which gay and women’s liberation are based. (p. 241)

Such acceptance requires an activist demand for a “major change in our social framework” undertaken by questioning “the basis on which society is organized” (Altman, 1971, p. 242). In his later analysis of lesbian/gay politics in *The Homosexualization of America*, Altman (1982) of course bemoaned the fact that “[t]he expectation that the growth of gay self-assertion would lead to a much greater degree of androgyny and blurring of sex roles seems, at least for the moment, to have been an illusion” (p. 14).

Although part of the critique of the tolerance framework is undertaken, as by Epstein and, more recently, by Michael Warner (2009), within the context of a critique of the persistence of neoliberalism, others have similarly argued of the dangers of tolerance and its formation within identity politics by critiquing the ways in which it maintains a violent subjectification as the basis for contemporary ontological thinking. This criticism has had a continuity from early gay liberation through poststructuralist and postmodern accounts of sexuality, particularly seen among writers of queer theory. For example, Judith Butler (2009, pp. 140–141), who has long critiqued identity politics as the basis for political organizing, points to the dangers of the “normative goal of tolerance” by asking whether the existing language of the subject is sufficient as a means for dialogue between different or opposed groups or identities. For Butler (2009), “Liberal norms presupposing an ontology of discrete identity cannot yield the kinds of analytic vocabularies we need” (p. 31). That is, seeking to protect excluded or marginalized subjects through normative frameworks of tolerance might produce those very protections but, ultimately, reproduces exclusion or marginalization by failing to democratize such protection. The answer, for Butler, is to persist in the critique of norms with a view to a “beyond” that undoes contemporary ontologies of subjecthood in favor of, as Altman described, a new human:

The problem is not merely how to include more people within existing norms, but to consider how existing norms allocate recognition differentially. What new norms are possible, and how are they wrought? What might be done to produce a more egalitarian set of conditions for recognizability? What might be done, in other words, to shift the very terms of recognizability in order to produce more radically democratic results. (Butler, 2009, p. 6)

The framework of tolerance thus mandates a certain ignorance (Butler, 2009, p. 143) of the complexity of selfhood and, in this case, sexual subjectivity, in such a way as to deny anything but the contemporary fixity of sexuality that maintains the regime of categorization and thereby excludes those who fail to fit within the category ideals.

Other writers have, in a similar way, critiqued tolerance and pointed to its dangers as a formation of politics and community. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, has pointed to the problematic use of the term *human rights* as a recognition-claim for the “right to remain different,” arguing that, within the normative framework of tolerance, human-rights approaches fail to sediment any form of solidarity in the social world and instead set goals for various forms of connecting and disconnecting among people who together would have political force (Bauman, 2011, p. 430). Or, as Butler again has put it, the “tolerance model” embraces a claim to be categorized as different that leaves all subjects “in their separate corner with their own views” despairing of “the possibility of some kind of actual conversation or mode of cultural translation that would make exchange possible” (Bell, 2010, p. 146). Such a tolerance is a turning away of one group or one identity from another for, as Derrida (1999, pp. 72–73) notes, this form of tolerance lacks the affirmation that comes through a Levinasian “duty of hospitality” that would open “the way of the humanity of the human.” Instead, group differences are depicted, as Joan Scott (1995) has put it, “categorically and not relationally, as distinct entities rather than interconnected structures or systems created through repeated processes of the enunciation of difference,” thereby failing to consider the language and framework used historically to construct and reproduce asymmetries of power (p. 9).

Thus, the critique of tolerance as a political goal and methodology targets a series of norms that includes normative identity frameworks, political institutions, national cultures, and activist politics. Although tacit, key to those critiques is the way in which tolerance maintains an unequal distribution of inclusions and exclusions in what constitutes norms, identities, humanity, and acceptability. In the context of queer youth suicide, it can be said that tolerance produces inequities for younger queer persons in what constitutes a livable life; these inequities operate, as I will discuss, across a number of different sites from media representation and stereotyping of queer persons to queer community formations and institutional practices.

TOLERANCE AND POLITICAL PROGRESS

One reading of Altman's take on tolerance involves seeing how it represents a type of political stillness by maintaining an insidious form of oppression in opposition to the liberal claims that tolerance of the nonnormative or the previously excluded is either the demonstration and fulfillment of progress or a necessary step in progression toward a liberated or democratic sociality.

To understand how tolerance as a political framework both produces a sense of time and how, in Altman's critique, time is frozen, it is useful to turn to some of Butler's recent work on the problem of time and the myth of progress. For Butler (2009, p. 102), hegemonic conceptions of progress define themselves against alternative formations of temporality, typically producing a concept of time for the purpose of their own self-legitimation. The fact that there are competing views of time and progress is the result of the ways in which particular histories are formative, the ways in which they intersect or fail to intersect with other histories—they organize forms and conceptions of temporality along spatial lines, frequently within a spatiality of linearity (Butler, 2009, p. 101).

The story—or history—of progressive modernity is thus one which is represented as a continuous and unfolding ideal of time (Butler, 2009, p. 103) whereby narrow liberties granted through tolerance are conceptualized as realizations along that continuous and unfolding map of time (p. 133). Although tolerance is a form of oppression, as Altman has argued, and a means by which the normative framework of ontologies is maintained rather than critiqued, as other writers have pointed out, its alibi occurs through its location alongside a doctrine of history as progressive and unfolding. For a subject or group of subjects, then, to be tolerated is viewed in this framing as having realized a particular goal, or having gained a step or milestone on that unfolding toward a historical, messianic point at which full tolerance of a particular brand of homosexuality is gained.

This is not to suggest that Altman's model of acceptance through the production of a new sociality and a new humanity and a new sexuality beyond the hetero/homo binary is any less the product of a progressive conception of history, for certainly it locates the new human in messianic terms of the future self to come. In this context of radicalism, acceptance does not by necessity occur as the end point in the unfolding of a path of history, along which tolerance is one step. Rather than viewing tolerance and acceptance as steps in a linear progression of history or as competing methods of minority politics framed as rights versus liberation, there is greater productive value in looking at how the two distinct frameworks conceive of historical progression differentially, produce concepts of time in different ways, and thereby produce subjectivity through competing normative frameworks and vocabularies of subjectivity via the operations of power. Where this distinction has value, then, is in how the operations of power filtered through

these ideas of history operationalize different possibilities for the condition for *being* nonheterosexual, for being perceived as (and self-perceiving) a life worthy of living, a life which can see itself in future—as opposed to temporally progressive—terms.

The difference between the politics of tolerance and acceptance here is the formation of activism. For tolerance to be realized (either as ultimate goal or step toward something else), it is deemed to require a mainstreaming of queer selves, identities, and lives (Vaid, 1995); and a politics that works within contemporary neoliberalism, utilizing the vocabulary of identity and subject fixity, embracing the hetero/homo binary as a formation of “sexual knowledge” or “truth,” and seeking protections from only the first two oppressions of persecution and discrimination—under the erroneous view that, once these have been eradicated, society itself will shift in some way to produce an environment in which stigmatization, shame, or the unbearability of living (for however few) are dissolved. As Altman (1971, p. 129) puts it, it is a politics that models itself only on existing forms (which might include rural claims and unionism), which demand only that queer persons “organize, prove ourselves, according to accepted community standards” in order to gain “our share of the cake.”²

However, the pathway to acceptance, while still framed by a progressive unfolding of history, requires a radicalism whereby community organizing is seen to be not a confirmation of notions of fixed queer identities but a challenge to the fixity of subjecthood. Radicalism critiques not just the conditions of acceptability for nonheterosexuals nor only the means by which sexual identities are constituted but all elements of sociality that produce norms, from child-rearing practices (Altman, 1971, p. 111) to contemporary norms of relationships and coupling (pp. 114–115); from capital (p. 103) to perceptions, echoing Foucault, of bodies and pleasures (p. 107).

HOMONORMATIVITY AS THE NEOLIBERAL PRODUCT OF THE TOLERANCE FRAMEWORK

The tolerance approach, as critiqued by Altman, can be understood as the ethical disposition of a neoliberalism by which queer identities, sexualities, behaviors, and articulations are accorded toleration through narrow norms that fit within neoliberal economization of subjectivity. In the neoliberalist and biopolitical framework of contemporary Western culture, narrow formations of nonheterosexuality are accorded toleration in being placed on a distribution curve, whereby certain nonheterosexual desires, behaviors, and identities are no longer consider abnormal but are still at a distance from the heterosexual norm (Warner, 2009, p. 291). Those who deviate further from the norm are accorded less tolerance. By working within the

tolerance framework, queer politics forms a representation of community as a category of queer individuals conforming to a particular set of stereotypes. Those who do not fall within the confines of a stereotype are excluded from representation and recognition. Such exclusiveness has most recently been termed *homonormativity*, a concept which mirrors the heteronormativity that likewise excludes some or all nonheterosexual persons from being accepted in social relationality as normative. Lisa Duggan (2002) uses the term to refer to the ways in which gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) community politics adopted a more conservative and assimilationist political strategy aiming for recognition of rights as a discrete cultural grouping. Such rights politics are understood to rely heavily on “safe” community representations deemed tolerable by broader society. Representing queerness through affluence, fitness, aesthetic competence, whiteness, and other narrow depictions ultimately required the promotion of queerness through consumption while excluding all that which is deemed undesirable or politically unpalatable. In many cases, homonormative depictions of queerness that center on taste, aesthetics, affluence, and career choices are produced and reinforced in media and broader society, establishing the persistent recirculation of a recognizable norm through stereotyped proximities of attributes to the identity category “queer” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 126). The perception that one is required to perform and, indeed, conform to a set of narrow stereotypes in order not only to be coherently queer but to belong to queerness is, thus, an added pressure that increases vulnerability among the young and those with fewer available resources to perform resilience against the inequities of nonbelonging.

What a homonormative queer culture does, then, is produce and reinforce a set of exclusions that is utilized to police the borders of queer community in order that it appear palatable, desirable, and profitable for wider neoliberal sociality. Conforming to neoliberal formations of minority and a weak multiculturalism, contemporary queer politics dislodges the inclusive, communitarian culture and politics of gay liberation in favor of iterations of rights and equality, where rights are given as “sameness with normativity” and equality as freedom for economic choice (Halperin and Traub, 2009, p. 10; Weiss, 2008, p. 89). As with all minority communities, disciplinary regimes come into play in the form of obligatory ways of being and expressing oneself that act as techniques of normalization, which can include ways of dressing, ways of undertaking physical exercise, ways of desiring, attitudes, and behaviors (Halperin, 1995, p. 32)—all of which are elements of subjectivity that can be adopted or adapted but also include other ways of being which are not so easily developed: racial and ethnic norms, gender conformity, economic affluence, body types, and age.

Thus, homonormativity is more than a political accommodation into neoliberalism but, as Susan Stryker (2008, p. 155) points out, something which works also at the micropolitical community level to authorize and

legitimate some queer persons and exclude others who are not seen as representative or aligned with dominant constructions of knowledge and power.

TOLERANCE, COMMUNITY, AND SAVING REFUGES

The question that is opened by the critique of homonormative tolerance in the context of queer youth suicide is whether it is possible for a queer community formed in the tolerance framework to operate as an inclusive site by which younger persons can overcome the debilitating sense of isolation that has long been implicated in queer youth suicidality (Gibson, 1989; Hegna and Wichstrøm, 2007, p. 23; King et al., 2008, p. 82). A significant strand of research that goes back to writings on queer youth vulnerability from the 1980s focuses on the effects on young queer persons of being isolated from access to other queer persons, queer communities, institutions, support groups, and social activities. Queer youth isolation was first identified by Eric Rofes (1983, p. 47), who suggested that “estrangement from the traditional support systems within our culture” was one of the major factors contributing to lesbian/gay suicides. The resulting logical argument is, therefore, that greater access to lesbian/gay-specific social institutions, venues, support groups, representations, and cultural practices provides means for developing resilience against queer youth vulnerability and suicide risk (Kulkin, Chauvin, & Percle, 2000, p. 11; Nicholas & Howard, 1998, p. 29).

Adding to the problem, much of this approach has relied on the undertheorized notion that once a younger queer person is able to access and participate inclusively in queer life in the form of institutions, recreational venues, nightclubs, bars, support groups, and other forms of community, the risk of suicide resulting from a sense of isolation is mitigated. Such queer sites, organizations, spaces, and media representations are presented as the “saving refuges” that provide a stability for lesbian and gay youth “who have reason to feel that they are living in enemy territory” (Gross, 1998, p. 98); access to GLBT community as a young adult is seen as both a source of hope and aspiration for overcoming a feeling of aloneness.

In some ways, this access risks being understood as a kind of magic solution, such that the “problem” of queer youth suicide is one located only within the context of younger persons who are not yet in a position to become part of the sociality of queer culture but who will be “safe” and no longer vulnerable once they do so. This has led to a vacuum in understanding the ways in which transitioning into sociality in a minority sexual community has its own risks, as well as the ways in which all minority communities depend on exclusions—both symbolic and actual—to maintain a sense of community and cultural bounds. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that suicides occur among young men who are indeed already accessing

community institutions or social life and, in some cases, are fully entrenched in it (Widdicombe, 1997).

One can understand oneself as a member of the category “nonheterosexual” without the sense of being included in its community formations if that person does not meet the homonormative conditions for belonging and recognition. Where homonormative communities are seen as exclusive—only tolerating or representing a narrow, tightly policed idea of what constitutes lesbian, gay, or queer identities—it is not necessarily that younger queer persons have direct experience of those communities in terms of physical, geographical, face-to-face presence. Rather, in many cases, the community is that which is witnessed and understood at much younger ages and often through contemporary media and online depictions. It is not a community of face-to-face subjects utilizing the same community institutions and sharing community symbols (Cohen, 1985); instead, it is a representation of that to which one aspires to belong, in which belonging and social participation are the cultural imperatives for subjective coherence, intelligibility, and recognizability (Butler, 1997, p. 27).

It is important to realize that one can be a member of a category and yet not included. As Agamben (1995, p. 25), drawing on Badiou, has pointed out, “Inclusion always exceeds membership,” and this is particularly the case for those younger persons who may perceive themselves as queer (or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or otherwise nonheterosexual), and thus as members of a community or category, but who do not perceive themselves as having the capacities to be included in its communal sociality due to the inability to perform that sexuality or life within the tolerable constraints of homonormativity.

There are five forms of exclusion produced through homonormativity that can be identified as impacting on queer youth generally. Many of these relate to the situational and cultural environment that makes possible the phenomenon of queer youth suicide. First, racial and ethnic exclusions: homonormativity’s production of the depiction of the queer citizen as an affluent, White male results in queer youth of different racial and ethnic backgrounds being not only underrepresented but also excluded from a full sense of belonging within queer community. Second, homonormativity produces a set of norms around gender conformity, and this has a significant impact on those who do not maintain contemporary norms of masculinity for men and femininity for women.

A third exclusion emerges in the form of the physical and relates predominantly to men and fitness. Much has been written on the idealization and reification of the fit, masculine, tanned, and toned body in queer culture (Ayres, 1999; Halperin, 1995, p. 32; Mohr, 1992, pp. 163–164; Padva, 2002). The fit, perfected, idealized body in queer masculine culture operates as spectacle but also as a measure of a norm: by being one of the major images of gay men available in both mainstream media and community publications

as well as in gay pornography, the image of “what a gay male looks like” is something encountered by youth often long before one may knowingly encounter another queer person. What that does for those who feel their bodies are not “fit enough” or “toned enough” or, effectively, “gay” enough is contribute to a situation in which one recognizes oneself as a member of the nonheterosexual category but, in fearing a failure to belong to a represented standard, fails to see oneself as capable of being included in a community of belonging necessary for livability, recognizability, and forging a sense of desire for being.

Fourth, there is the exclusion of the nonaffluent, who are effectively marginalized in queer culture for failure to conform to the stereotype of being an avid consumer or for failing to produce a sense of aesthetics through consumption. Much media depiction of queer persons circulates the notion that to be queer means to be an überconsumer, with shopping as a favored leisure activity and consumer aesthetics as the means by which the self is produced (Papacharissi & Fernback, 2008, p. 363). As Brown (2009) has put it:

In representations of urban gay life ... the affluent gay consumer is invariably a man ... assumed to be white (although this is seldom directly remarked upon), well educated, and employed in a professional capacity. He lives in the city centre, probably in a minimalist loft apartment that is largely decorated in a normatively “masculine” style. He is well dressed, and immaculately groomed—the epitome of metrosexuality. ... Much of his social life is spent in gay bars, clubs, and restaurants. ... His every consumption choice confirms his identity as an urban gay man. (p. 1506)

While Brown is right to point out that this is a marketing image, it is one which dominates depictions of queer masculinity both in “mainstream” and queer community representations; there is much evidence that the homonormativity of queer consumption is taken onboard by a large number of queer persons, in very conspicuous ways, as long as they have the financial advantage and capacity to do so. Importantly, this actively excludes younger persons who do not have an independent income and who certainly do not have the financial capability to produce a queer sexual selfhood through such heavy consumption. The reification of affluence and commodity consumption are not the only economies that operate in queer community (Brown, 2009, p. 1508), although the sorts of diverse economies and sharing that are found at times in queer communities are not necessarily those which welcome youth, who tend to be excluded from consideration in such critiques.

Finally—and dovetailing with the exclusion of the nonaffluent—queer youth *in general* are excluded, particularly in the homonormative politics of queer community. This is best witnessed in the gradual shift in lobbying toward gay marriage, civil unions, and other rights claims that are based on

domestic, coupled partnerships. Such a focus on domesticity produces queer sexual identity as “a highly privatized, monogamous and white(ned) docile subjectivity that has been decriminalized and ostensibly invited into the doors of U.S. national belonging” (Agathangelou, Bassichis, & Spira, 2008, p. 124).

Again, the point should be made that youth cannot necessarily perform that particular mode of nonheterosexuality, as coupledness and domesticity are not available to the very young, nor to many others. Indeed, the pressure that comes from homonormative politics to produce the self through a habitus of domestic partnership is greater through queer political representation than is necessarily found today in heteronormative social contexts.

These five forms of exclusion, undertaken in complicity with the tolerance framework in order to represent a recognizable and safe queer personage, establish the conditions that (1) make it almost impossible for many younger persons to transition from queer adolescence into the dominant performative codes of queer identity; (2) exclude those who would be unable to achieve a full sense of participation and belonging because they do not or cannot fulfil the racial, ethnic, or body-type criteria; and (3) automatically exclude minors from representation under the GLBT banner, creating an increased gap between the “queer haves” and the younger “queer have-nots.”

Resulting from the narrow forms of queerness that are deemed tolerable, recirculated as homonormativity, one can thus be just as isolated within queer community and its representations as one might well have felt as a nonheterosexual young person existing in a heavily heteronormative environment, if not more so. Indeed, the argument here is that in being given the “hope” that queer community is accepting and the “answer” to isolation, anything that works to exclude a person from the promise of belonging and participation can be much worse than the sense of isolation or exclusion felt in being a young queer person within a heteronormatively oriented environment, due to what will be perceived as the failure to belong or to meet the standards required for access to that “saving refuge.”

QUEER YOUTH SUICIDE, EXCLUSION, AND RELATIVE MISERY

Recent work on suicide by James Barber (2001) provides a useful way in which to understand the complexity of exclusion and risks involved in the distinction between belonging to a category of sexual nonnormativity and community belonging. Barber criticizes researchers and public commentators who discuss youth suicide in terms of “generations” in crisis. He referred to this depiction as the “absolute misery hypothesis”: the “intuitively straightforward notion that the suicide rate of a generation is a surrogate measure of that generation’s happiness. The more suicides, the greater the level of unhappiness” (Barber, 2001, p. 49). That is, the social marginalization,

economic disadvantage, or discrimination against an *entire* community or society had been thought previously to be a factor in a greater number of suicides. Cross-national analysis, however, indicated that this was not the case, and instead higher rates of suicide have been associated with higher levels of psychological adjustment, happiness, and affluence among groups or whole populations (Smalley, Scourfield, & Greenland, 2005, p. 138). Barber (2001, p. 53) countered the absolute misery hypothesis with a proposal to return to Durkheim's sociological finding that higher national suicide rates often tend to accompany good national fortune; he suggested approaching suicidality factors through what he termed a "relative misery hypothesis":

According to the "relative misery hypothesis," young men's predisposition to suicide is influenced by their social comparisons. When those around them are perceived to be better off than they are, the distress of vulnerable youth is magnified and their susceptibility to suicidality increased. The relative misery hypothesis would therefore predict a rise in suicide rates whenever there is a rise in the overall mood or happiness of a population, whether that rise is due to the end of war or any other event of general and positive social significance. At such times, the misery of the community's unhappiest young men will be compounded by the isolation they experience at witnessing the happiness of those around them. (Barber, 2001, p. 53)

While Barber and others who utilize the relative misery approach are often referring to whole national populations, whereby the suicide rates among the most disadvantaged or marginalized are higher when the country is doing well, this model provides a valuable way in which to understand why queer youth suicide rates continue to be high while, in neoliberal, multicultural, and homonormative terms in Western countries, many queer people are much *less* discriminated against or socially excluded today than only one or two decades ago. It is to say that *relative* to the broader queer population, *some* younger persons do not have the *same* increasing advantages, resources, finances, emotional resilience, authorized tastes, or acceptable bodies in order to belong and thus to enjoy the benefits of tolerance. Within this understanding the likelihood of suicide is in fact greater rather than reduced by an assumed trickle-down effect from assimilationist rights gains and the benefits received by more affluent queer adults.

Where upward social comparison is a factor in psychological adjustment, the perception that one is worse off than one's lesbian or gay peers is a problem that needs to be addressed. It is valuable to bear in mind Giorgio Agamben's assertion that misery—which he relates also to exclusion—is not only an economic or social concept but a political category (1995, pp. 178–179), thereby implicating not only queer politics in

its influence on the formation of queer community and representation but also broader political frameworks including neoliberal tolerance, both thus having a role in the conditions that make queer youth suicide thinkable in terms of relative misery.

Queer people are, indeed, doing so much better *if* the narrow homonormative depiction is seen as representative. That is, some queer persons move closer to the broad social definition of normativity and hence are tolerated within the framework that upholds contemporary norms of sexuality (heteronormative and homonormative). However, it is the function of community discipline through representation and stereotyping that decides who those persons will be. This, then, has raised the bar for the production of queer selfhood and queer belonging, creating a greater gap between membership and belonging, and greater difficulties for integrating into queer community than existed prior to the emphasis on homonormative representations in queer politics, culture, and media. These establish, then, not merely the risk of exclusion or isolation but social comparisons relative to the homonormativity which disciplines queer identity through community formation and which circulates even more strongly through stereotypes in mass media, queer community press, and online representations.

The assumption that increasing tolerance and queer community access are the solutions to many of the causal factors in queer youth suicide relies on the false notion that *all* queer youth shift away from risk and vulnerability as diminishing persecution, discrimination, and other such social changes become public and knowable broadly. Rather, it is necessary to see that contentment as the product of certain narratives and stereotypes of queer adulthood can, in fact, establish two elements of comparison or measurement for younger persons that produce relative misery as a causal factor in suicide—effectively a doubling of relativities.

First, there is the comparison between themselves and straight peers who are seen to face fewer social problems, less capacity for shame, less likelihood of discrimination, and lower risk of being bullied. Second, there is the comparison between themselves and queer adults who appear to be doing well or at least are perceived to be happy, well-off, and content. In addition to the relative misery this produces, the construction and representation of queer adults through homonormative depictions establishes norms that subsequently are found to be unrealizable, which is a known factor in the creation of self-deprecation, self-esteem deficits, and the manifestation of self-destructive behaviors (Hunter and Harvey, 2002, p. 17).

Again, this is not to suggest that queer youth have not benefited from such changes but that, for those who are excluded through homonormativities in either representation, stereotype, or experience, the relative misery can be much worse—putting some at greater risk of suicidality than in previous social perceptions of queer community, culture, and identity.

IT GETS BETTER? ASPIRATION, FRUSTRATION, AND HOPELESSNESS

One of the ways in which we can understand how relative misery works as a way of thinking about what makes queer youth suicide thinkable within contemporary queer toleration is through the concept of aspiration. The gap between self-perception of membership of a queer category and the capacity to belong or be included within queer community as the geographic or conceptual space of acceptance, overcoming heteronormative isolation and saving refuge, is, then, a site of aspiration. For Arjun Appadurai, aspiration is not simply about individual wants and choices but is formed in interaction within social life. It is part of a system of ideas, operationalized in relationality, located within a map of ideas and beliefs about life, death, the nature of worldly possessions, the significance of material assets, social relations, social permanence of a society, and the value of peace and warfare (Appadurai, 2004). Most important for Appadurai (2004), the *capacity to aspire* is not evenly distributed in any society, for not all have the power, recognition, and material resources to be conscious of the links between the self and objects of aspiration—a reduced capacity to aspire.

In critically engaging with Appadurai's theories of the culture of aspiration, Debraj Ray has made a useful point in suggesting that aspiration begins with the recognition of oneself within categories of similitude. The social effect of aspiration is that each subject possesses a window onto a zone of similar individuals and draws aspirations from *their* lives, achievements or ideals (noting that all aspirations will be inherently multidimensional, not singularly comparative) (Ray, 2002, p. 2). Ray points out that when the window is opened too broadly or widely, subjects face the "curse of frustrated aspirations": the realization that particular aspirations belonging to specific cognitive neighborhoods in our midst (that is, similar persons) cannot necessarily be achieved, or achieved as easily, or at all.

One site highlights the binary distinction between tolerance and acceptance through depicting queer youth experience as *aspiring* to be tolerated is the *It Gets Better* website. The video-blogging project *It Gets Better* (<http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>) was founded September 2010 by syndicated columnist Dan Savage in response to a spate of reported queer student suicides in the United States that year. The site hosts more than fifty thousand video contributions, many from queer adults who seek to provide hope for younger persons by showing that queer adulthood is markedly different from the experiences of harassment, bullying, loneliness, or surveillance experienced by queer youth in school and family environments.

This is among the first widely available communicative media form to directly address queer youth on issues related to suicide and the first to draw on lived experiences as a means by which to provide resources for queer youth resilience. The site aims to help younger persons overcome a sense of hopelessness—as lack of hope is a key concept in how we culturally perceive

suicidality. By positioning queer youth as lacking in hope for the future, the site constructs the notion of youth within a linear pattern of development toward a sense of stability and normalcy as queer adult, which has important implications for how queerness is perceived in cultural and political terms.

The purpose of *It Gets Better* is to show that escape from such environments is not only possible but should be expected. In what way, then, is this life that comes after school better, and how is that better-ness depicted by the contributors to the site? In the founding video, Savage and his partner describe a list of benefits of being out of school, including their relationship; the ways in which their families engage positively with the relationship; the adoption at birth of their son, who is now thirteen years old; their travels as a family to Europe; the pleasure taken in sociality with close friends. Finally, it is noted that one improved element is the absence of the bullies and tormenters from school: “The people who were picking on me then are completely irrelevant. I don’t know where they are now; I don’t know if they’re happy. I assume that they’re miserable, because miserable people like to make other people miserable. Once I got out of high school they couldn’t touch me anymore.” In this way, the disciplinary regime of the bullying culture of high school becomes that which one escapes to have a “better” or more “tolerable” life. The inevitable, temporal moment of leaving school is depicted as the pivotal point at which “it gets better” through the motif of escaping the intolerable.

Aspiration in many of the videos is presented through neoliberal and homonormative stereotypes that are necessary for a queer person to be deemed tolerable socially. For example, one video upload presents seven lesbian and gay professionals working for the international firm PricewaterhouseCoopers. Presenting a series of short bytes from each of the seven staff members, the video relates the negative experiences of being in school in contrast to the “better life” to which the young target viewers are encouraged to aspire:

Things changed for me when . . . I moved to New York City. I realized that really the world was different, and New York City was a good example of that diversity. . . . I now live in a great city, I have a great job and a great boyfriend. . . . And now I’ll have the opportunity to transfer internationally for my career and get even more experiences out there. So I want to tell you it does get better, and the best is yet to come. . . . I work for an amazing firm that is a front-runner and a leader in everything related to diversity and inclusion. Life does get better. It gets way better. (<http://www.itgetsbetter.org/video/entry/3360/>)

Importantly, the aspects about life that are better are described here in terms of geographic location (living in New York City), career (professional), and domestic partnership (happily coupled). All of these are depicted as

achievable subsequent to that pivotal moment of being able to move on from high school and enter either working or university life. It should be noted, of course, that part of what such corporate videos do is operate to present a public relations textuality, requiring that the promotion of the firm is as much a part of the promotion of postschooling life (Benn, Todd, & Pendleton, 2010). This might in certain cases skew the emphasis toward career success as the “evidence” of queer happiness and the reason for hope. While there is value in describing an environment to which younger persons can aspire, little attention has been paid to the potential for frustrated aspiration for those who will never be able to achieve these white-collar, homonormative cultural attributes of tolerance and will thereby be subject to relative misery.

The relationality that emerges in relative misery as a causal factor in youth suicides is one of frustrated aspiration—the unbearability of living in the context of perceived differential levels of belonging, inclusion, or acceptance between one and one’s peers. In establishing particular formations of queer life, selfhood, desire, bodies, tastes, or behaviors through homonormativity, which, in neoliberalism, will be deemed tolerable homosexuality, a young queer person who understands himself or herself through similitude to be a member of queer community who is yet to forge inclusion, participation, or belonging, will operationalize that goal of belonging through aspiration. When the aspiration to belong is likely to be met it is because that person is able to be included within a narrow perception of queerness within the tolerance framework, that is, to be or to perceive oneself as homonormative.

For those, however, who visualize too wide a gap between the self and the aspirational queerness presented by homonormative stereotypes, there is the risk of frustrated aspiration and relative misery. In these cases, life is relegated to an unbearability, marking its own intolerability. When aspirations cannot be met and belonging is not possible, self-resentment, self-hatred, and negative attitudes turned toward the self become deeply felt attachments that turn against a desire to live.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND TOLERANCE

While the normative framework of tolerance within neoliberalism will tend to tolerate an increasingly broad range of nonnormative sexualities along a distributional curve of norms, its reliance on a normative ontological framework will continue to produce exclusions that are reproduced in representations and thereby maintain a gap between queerness and belonging. Altman’s push for acceptance in place of tolerance is, however, a more effective means by which all queer youth can achieve recognizability. For queer politics, acceptance involves seeking the claim to humanity for all peoples. This, then,

serves a purpose in making real the misery and exclusion of some lives, in making them recognizable as lives that are worthy of living. Agamben (1995) makes the point that once sovereignty was transferred to a concept of “the people,” it transformed into an “embarrassing presence, and misery and exclusion appear for the first time as an altogether intolerance scandal” (pp. 178–179). In the same way, if acceptance is the political method that confers recognizability on persons regardless of sexual identity, orientation, behavior, preference, or desire, then it aids in establishing the conditions of recognizability that draw attention to the relative misery of those who are excluded from some form of community, belonging, social participation, recognition, or representation, opening the field of possibilities for queer youth suicide to be addressed.

For queer politics, then, it involves a reorientation of how it perceives its outcomes. The funding and time of any broad-based rights movement is always finite, and some fields of intervention are inevitably ignored in favor of other fields, such as that of lobbying for same-sex marriage rights (Cover, 2010). As Warner (1999) points out, the international campaigns for same-sex marriage rights pour “millions of dollars of scarce resources . . . into fights that most of us would never have chosen” (p. 144). Indeed, that might include those such as younger persons who have not yet had the opportunity to participate in the community political formations through which such choices are made. Thus the structure and method of queer politics governs not only the political agenda but the ways in which queer youth issues are either taken up or sidelined.

However, to produce acceptance requires understanding it not only as a goal but a tool, and one to be deployed by queer political organizing *in favor of* its current and persistent efforts in the easier-to-achieve realm of rights-claims. It is important to bear in mind that acceptance as an outcome is never complete, for the acceptance one demands is a democracy. Despite its claims to the contrary, tolerance is undemocratic and inhospitable. For Derrida, tolerance is “a conditional, circumspect, careful hospitality” (Borradori, 2003, p. 127), whereas unconditional hospitality involves the situation in which the Other is welcomed without even requiring a statement of identity or identification (Derrida, 1999).

Unconditional hospitality, of course, puts at risk the system or regime that offers hospitality—in this case, heteronormativity. To offer hospitality (as a form of reception, of acceptance) is to offer not merely to give a place at the table (or, as Altman put it about tolerance, a share in the cake) but to open the possibility that what is heteronormative is no longer to be considered normative. In the same way, extending beyond homonormativity involves queer community, on one hand, seeking communality with broader sociality through radical demands for acceptance and, on the other, extending beyond the regime of tolerance to give inclusion, inclusiveness, and recognizability to those queer youth who otherwise would not meet the strictures

of the homonorm; it is to undo the homonorm in their name and on their behalf.

For Derrida, a democratic hospitality takes myriad forms, and it is not something of which we can be completely sure of any definition (La Caze, 2011, pp. 609–610). In his conception of democracy as that which is to come (*la démocratie à venir*), it is not only a necessary tool to be used reflectively or as an “impossible real” to guide political action. Importantly, its nature as that which is “to come” is not intended to mean that it is of the future in an unfolding political history of progress but that it is a promise of what cannot be fully present (Derrida, 2005, p. 86). The acceptance of nonheterosexuality, likewise, is not something that will find fruition, but nor should it be simply a goal at the end of a modernist, liberal line of unfolding history or progress. Rather, it is that which must persistently be revised. If acceptance and liberation are to mean a new human, which implies new ways of being sexual and perhaps not just of sexual identity but of having them differently, then there is the ever-present and ongoing need to ensure that inclusion (and not just categorical membership) continues: not merely inclusion of new categories or names or ways of being but new ways of *doing inclusion*, such that the gap between queer youth and queer ideal—or the gap between the aspirations of youth to belong and the reality of frustrated aspiration through exclusion or nonbelonging—are forever in question.

NOTES

1. The popular reliance on statistics tends to disavow the more important question of asking why some queer youth are more resilient than others (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 183), thus risking the unwitting pathologization of queer youth. It remains that young queer lives are *often* (but not always) more difficult than the lives of those living in sexual normativity due to a range of social factors such as persistent heteronormativity, bullying, forms of shame, and instances of marginalization or exclusion, and this does currently involve increased risks that may lead to suicide and self-harm. However, to avoid depicting queerness as the risk in itself, the way in which we attempt to understand the sociality of being queer must occur through a lens that focuses on youth resilience, agency, changing cultural forms, and new or alternative understandings of sexuality. That is, queer younger persons are not vulnerable *because* they are queer; rather, there are greater risks of vulnerability resulting from social, cultural, and psychological factors that may be a result of the heteronormative environmental context in which that person is having, feeling, or expressing nonnormative sexual desires or behaviors.

2. The metaphors of eating that emerge from Altman’s (1971) critical use of the phrase “share of the cake” (p. 129), Epstein’s (1990) politics of the “piece of the pie” (p. 290), and in the Log Cabin Republicans’ politics of ensuring conservative queer persons have a “seat at the table” (Wagley, 2011) are instructive in exploring how language used in minority politics claims establish different intelligibilities of those claims in the context of the distinction between tolerance and acceptance/hospitality. By using the metaphor of the meal, the distinction becomes one of asking whether the lobby politics formation is structured within the equitably shared feast or if it is about the receipt of “table scraps.”

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